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2010-07

CHDS Names Two Alumni for FEMA Fellowship

Center for Homeland Defense and Security

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/51323>



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CHDS Names Two Alumni for FEMA Fellowship

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Two alumni from the West Coast have been awarded the 2010 Center for Homeland Defense and Security Alumni Fellowships and will be going to Washington, D.C., to work for one year with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Sara Kay Fisher, Emergency Response and Security Manager with the Administrative Office of the Courts in San Francisco, and Laurie Van Leuven, Security and Emergency Management Manager and Strategic Advisor with Seattle Public Utilities, are scheduled to begin their work in the nation's Capitol in September.

The goal of the Alumni Fellowships is to enable participants to share their local expertise while in turn gaining insight into the workings of the upper echelon of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which sponsors the fellowship. Nine alumni have been awarded the annual fellowships since the program's inception in 2005.



During the one-year appointment, alumni work on an array of projects, but usually develop one major endeavor as the centerpiece of their work.

Van Leuven, a 2009 CHDS graduate, hopes to expound on and implement in some way her thesis research on optimizing the use of Web 2.0 technologies in homeland security and emergency management. When she wrote her thesis, interest in social media was just starting to build. Since then, interest has grown.

"I am excited to work with groups that are already using or looking at the potential of social media for improving citizen engagement and information sharing that will hopefully lead to more efficient resource allocation decisions," Van Leuven said. "I think practitioners in the field understand this is the way of the future but many are not quite sure how to take that first step forward. A national information sharing strategy incorporating social media tools might be a good place to start."

Fisher, a 2008 CHDS graduate, plans to explore projects that help bridge the gap between emergency management/homeland security and government agencies that may not understand how they fit into those efforts.

"This may be an overgeneralization, but I find that judicial branch entities don't generally seem to understand how they can or should be included in emergency management planning or decision-making at the local, state, or federal levels," Fisher noted. "Court leaders oftentimes don't know the right questions to ask or the right doors to knock on to insert themselves into the emergency management planning process."

She hopes to bring her experience in filling that gap to FEMA. In her role with California state courts, Fisher has worked for much of the past five years to ensure courts throughout the state develop Continuity of Operations Plans. In doing so, Fisher has learned the challenges that faced the court system in preparing to recover and continue operating from a potential catastrophic event.

"My knowledge of the challenges that exist in preparing the judiciary to recover from incidents will be helpful in my work with FEMA about how to overcome those challenges," she said. "This work will, hopefully, be translatable to other jurisdictions in addition to state and local judicial branch operations."

Van Leuven's current job involves securing Seattle Public Utilities' infrastructure, such as drinking water, wastewater

and flood control systems, and debris management capabilities. She will take to Washington a wealth of experience in critical infrastructure protection and the hurdles local governments face in recovering from disaster.

"I think an important perspective I can bring to Washington will be a really clear understanding of what hardships citizens face after an emergency or disaster," she said. "I have always worked in critical infrastructure and in providing direct services to customers. When those essential services are disrupted, I have that local knowledge of what kind of impact outages have on citizens and what it takes to get those systems up and running again. "

Moreover, both women look forward to learning how federal operations work and the challenges that level of government faces in interacting with state and local agencies.

And, both say the educational foundation received at CHDS will be beneficial in taking on the fellowships.

"I believe the element of my educational experience that will be most helpful during my time at FEMA will include the research and project development process that accompanied the thesis writing enterprise," Fisher noted. "The insight I gained into the many varied jurisdictions involved in homeland security will also help increase my usefulness to FEMA and to the homeland security sphere, in general."

Added Van Leuven: "I think the really broad foundations that the CHDS master's program provides is going to be very helpful in being able to recognize where the core issues lay. It gives me the capability to analyze the problem, to think about creative strategies and to consider available technologies to solve them."

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